911
ULTIMATES 2

Same Team, Next Year

A lot can change in a year.

Oh, nothing much has changed in our world in the year since *Mark Millar & Bryan Hitch* wrapped up the first Ultimates series. The same duo are returning with a new ***Ultimates 2*** series, presenting the same strong storytelling and stunning art that made the original ***Ultimates*** a must-read for Marvel fans.

But in the Ultimate Marvelverse, a year has also passed, and a lot has changed!...

*"**Ultimates 2** opens a year after **Ultimates 1**," Mark Millar said, "and we're in the middle of this war on terror that we all unfortunately find ourselves in. What does Captain America do when aid workers are being held hostage in Iraq and his superiors are telling him they want to drop him in? What do the others do when they're asked to subdue an anti-war demonstration that Thor has organized?"*

Sounds different from the alien invasion saga that kicked off the series, doesn't it? That's no accident. "The first book was relatively simple, but the sequel is very complex and the drama is naturally arising out of those situations," Millar said. "These people all just want to do the right thing, but what if the right thing, according to Fury, is a pre-emptive strike on Iran because they're a danger to the entire Middle East with their nuclear weapons program?

"The other thing we start to worry about is if this was the reason Fury put the Ultimates together in the first place. Back in issue two, he said he wanted to save the world—but what if saving the world for him isn't quite the same as Tony's more Utopian idea that's maybe closer to the traditional Marvel Universe Avengers?"

Will the concept of the Ultimates as a super-powered branch of the US government disturb some in the Ultimate Marvelverse? "Definitely," Millar said. "Thor really becomes the voice of this when he starts talking about how these guys are being used by the military-industrial complex and this is a big feature of the first ar, 'Gods and Monsters.' The second arc, 'Grand Theft America,' is where we focus on the more international ramifications of America's elevation to the single world hyperpower. We're introduced to the European answer to the Ultimates in the first arc, but we see a more hostile global response in this final arc. The country is pretty polarized in their support—just as they are with the current war. I think it would be right down the middle, just like we see today."

Is the government worried that the team that Fury has assembled might have *too* much power—that they might take *too* much control? "Oh, Washington isn't worried at all. Fury is absolutely on the same page as these guys and the team is gradually being replaced by more militaristic types following orders. Cap, for the moment, will do what they say—and all the rest are either professional soldiers or being sidelined. Tony and Thor are the wild cards, but even Tony is forced to concede that when you're in the big chair you sometimes need to make some difficult decisions. Fury talks to him about North Korea and asks when exactly do they step in and sort this out. Do they wait until the ICBMs are flying towards California? This isn't the cozy, comic-book world he expected when he wanted to become a superhero and rescue cats from trees. He and the rest of the team have to make some very grown-up decisions."

But aren't these guys superheroes, devoted to doing the right thing? " I don't think there's such a thing as a hero, It's a lovely idea and this isn't meant to be cynical, but I think people are just people who are capable of very good or very bad things. Even the best people I know have an off day... and that's what The Ultimates is really about. It's just people in suits who are trying to live up to the pressures their names and reps put upon them—and the stress this causes in their lives. Sometimes they rise to the occasion and sometimes they mess up. It's really more like an ensemble cast of characters (as we'd find in *Oz* or *ER)* interacting with each other as opposed to the traditional superhero versus supervillain thing. I love that formula and it makes up the bulk of my reading, but this book is about something else. These are several distinct personalities and they cover the entire political spectrum so they're going to argue and they're going to disagree with the orders they're sometimes given."

So who's going to be most—well, shall we say "outspoken"?—in his disagreement when Fury sends the team into action against another country? "Well, I don't want to give too much away, but the most obvious choice is Thor. There's just *no way* he'd take part in a pre-emptive strike, and his natural paranoia would make him question everything from their motives to S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence.

"Tony and Jan would also have serious reservations, although Jan is from a military family—her Dad was based in Germany—and so she would lean towards doing what she was told.

"Natasha would do it because she's getting paid, Hawkeye would do it like a shot because he's a likable righT-wing character and a thoroughbred hawk, Banner would be ranting about it down in his cell, the mutants wouldn't really see what the fuss was about and probably not bother showing up, and Cap would be troubled. His instincts are to do what he's told, but the last time somebody started talking about pre-emptive strikes to contain a middle-eastern menace in our cities was Germany in the '30s and they were appeased by a British Prime Minister, too. Cap would see some very disturbing echoes, but being an old soldier and recognizing a genuine threat to American soil—if these guys really have a nuclear program—he'd just get in there and try to do the right thing."

Of course, the Ultimates are more than agents of the US government; in their first series, the did save the entire world from alien assault. So how does that world view these incredibly powerful beings? Are they views as heroes world-wide? "They know they saved the world and I really wanted to play with that," Millar said. "The JLA and Avengers save the world every month and everybody kind of shrugs and gets back to work and I wanted to really hammer home how *big* it would be. People would be dancing in the streets for months... That's going to buy a *huge* amount of good will, but the team have squandered it a little in the twelve months since...

"This interests me more than the alien invasions, anyway, because this is where the fun stuff happens like the relationships, the budget cuts, the guys who aren't pulling their weight, and so on... I wanted the dynamic to be almost like an office or any other workplace, and they do the things we all do with our colleagues. Like some, dislike others, hang around and have dinner, invite others over for nights at your house. Hawkeye is in a very domestic set-up and his wife is always suggesting everybody comes over and gets some Chinese."

What led Millar to set the second series a year after the events of the first? "Initially, it was a response to the delays in the first volume. 'Homeland Security' took place over just a few days and yet took eighteen months to come out, so I wanted to get some catch-up and move the characters on.

"Dramatically, it interests me to do this, too. It's like bumping into a bunch of old friends when you haven't seen them for a while and it's a thrill to catch up with what's been happening to them. There was a sense of Superman having been up to stuff between the first two movies and everyone forming their relationship with him during that gap. Likewise, to go from the ceremony at the end of Star Wars to the ice planet Hoth in the opening of ***Empire*** really threw me and had me eager to find out what these guys were doing here.

"I wanted to hit the ground running with ***Ultimates 2*** and plunge everybody straight into the action and have a few surprises. It's also a trick I learned on ***The Authority,*** which is that if you explain everything and hear everything a character is thinking they seem less real. Jack Hawksmoore and The Midnighter seemed real to me because they seemed to have a life outside the stories we were reading and I like having these little gaps where they existed without you. It's just a personal preference, but it adds an extra dimension to the story for me if they refer to stuff they were up to, but the reader only gets hints."

So what have the team members been up to in the past year? "There are a few surprises and I don't want to give too much away—but we ended the original with Cap suddenly finding himself kissing a married woman on the dance-floor. he's been plunged into a world he doesn't recognize, is seeing someone who isn't divorced from her husband yet and under the watchful eye of the world's media. On paper, their relationship seems perfect: two superheroes and a girl who looks like Lucy Liu dating a guy who looks like Brad Pitt. But I've had a great time showing how nightmarish this can be with him listening to the radio at night when she's watching DVDs, Steve wanting double-dates with Bucky and all his old army buddies and always moaning about girls with tattoos and piercings.... He looks amazing, but narks like your granddad and that's been enormous fun.

"Tony and Natasha are at it like knives; there's a good scene with the Billionaire Bachelor Society in issue four I won't spoil, but essentially Tony has fallen in love for the first time in his life and plans to make an honest woman of Natasha. She's really his perfect girl, but everyone else hates her and points to the fact that she's called the Black Widow and has seven dead, rich husbands in her past. But Tony won't listen. She can out-drink him and has a bigger taste for adventure than even he has, so he's completely smitten—and, again, in issue four there's a big surprise.

"The Hulk takes prominence for the first three issues. Some interesting stuff with Banner and Pym that will be quite unexpected. I will say no more except that Cap and the others are getting irritated about the fact they lied about their first adventure and covered up the fact that Banner was The Hulk.

"Thor takes center stage in issues four and five. This is Thor's secret origin finally revealed, and it's a shocker. I've seen so much online speculation about this, but nobody—*nobody*—has even come close. It's also where we meet Ultimate Loki, and Bryan has done a particularly good job on that one.

"Issue six is the Ultimate Defenders. I wrote this issue before any of the others because I was so excited about it. The first six issues form an arc, but the arc is really comprised of a three-parter, a two parter and a one-shot that all leads up to a conclusion before we hit the final arc."

The Ultimate Defenders? Who are they, and how did they become a super-team? "The Ultimates are a federally funded bunch of people who cost billions of dollars every year. It struck me as interesting that the flip-side of this must exist, and I wanted little groups to start popping up all over the place—wannabes who just want in on the action and who are rehearsing in their bedrooms, putting ads in papers for their teams and so on," Millar said. "Instead of aircraft carriers in the sky, they're maybe getting cabs to their adventures and all bitching about each other. They just appear in issue six and relate quite strongly to The Ultimates, but I can't explain why just yet without a major spoiler for the first three issues. It's a lot of fun, though. I'd love to write a spin-off book like this..."

Millar warns readers up front that ***Ultimates 2*** isn't an ongoing series, no matter how much readers wish that it was. "This is just two six issue arcs. It's tempting to go on and do a third year, because the book is obviously very popular and has won us a lot of awards and so on, but you have to be true to yourself when you do this stuff. The minute you're just doing it for the check, you've had it. You've got to sit down with the same enthusiasm as you had when you wrote your first issue, otherwise what's the point?"

But for these twelve issues, Millar is having a ball—and he's particularly enjoying the opportunity to explore the Ultimate Marvelverse, a world much less bogged down by superhero continuity than the standard Marvel Universe... and a world much closer to our own in many way. "This is especially true in a book like The Ultimates, which has always prided itself on being one strand away from this world that most of us inhabit. The Marvel Universe is a little more fictional and the DC Universe is almost completely fictional—right down to the fact that the cities even have different names—but the Ultimate line is accessible because people have a point of reference...

" Bill [Jemas] and *Joe [Quesada]* had a very simple formula when they devised the Ultimate Universe. They wanted to follow what Stan had done back in the '60s and that's attract a mainstream audience by giving them a world they could *understand*, as opposed to a Marvel Universe with 4700 Marvel properties running around. They needed a stepping stone and the Ultimate Universe was a way of introducing new readers to the much richer Marvel U by way of a much simpler situation—more akin to Marvel 1962 than Millennial Marvel."

Millar has some good news for the fans who lamented the lengthy delays between ***Ultimates*** and ***Ultimates 2***. Since he and *Bryan Hitch* have had a chance to work ahead and build up a healthy backlog of material, they should be able to keep ***Ultimates 2*** coming on a monthly schedule—no more lengthy multi-month delays between installments!

Ultimates 2 #1, a $2.99 comic, is scheduled for release at about the same time as this issue of ***CSN***. The book is being offered in two formats: a standard comic and a black-and-white sketch edition variant that presents black-and-white Hitch's pencil art without lettering or overtype, followed by the script for the issue. Check with your friendly neighborhood comic book retailer for info on availability of this one-in-ten variant edition.

BY MATT BRADY & CLIFF BIGGERS

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